

# TRANSLATING A MODERN PERSIAN NOVEL WITH A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

(on the example of *Tubā va ma'nā-ye šab*  
by Šahrnuš Pārsipur<sup>1</sup>)

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*Tubā va ma'nā-ye šab* ("Tuba and the Meaning of Night")<sup>2</sup> is a life-story of an Iranian woman, starting at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ending somewhere in mid-sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Narration of the novel concentrates on private life of its heroine (Tubā, Hāji Adib's daughter) and most of its action takes place within the closed space of her house in a traditional neighbourhood in Tehran. What presents the greatest difficulties for a Polish translator of the book is not the language itself, but rather the realities in which the action of the story develops.

The action of the novel covers several historical periods the most decisive for the modern history of Iran. It starts on the eve of the Constitutional Revolution (1906) and reaches the verge of Mohammad-Rezā Pahlavi's rule.

The text abounds in realities of the times in question: the action takes place in the old part of Tehran, in the social circles of traditional bazaar community and the impoverished Qājār aristocracy. Historical events intermingle with fiction, historical personalities (Šeyx Xiyābāni, Mošir ad-doule) appear alongside the purely literary characters. The narrative, covering a period of over 70 years, states the changes which occur in Iran (changes of political and social situation, modernisation, changes of customs, attitudes, lifestyle and mentality, transformation of urban texture etc.).

Numerous references are made to Islam and its traditions, to Persian history, mythology and literature. By introducing some side motifs, the author reinterprets the stories borrowed from well-known, classical and modern, Persian literary works – by Attār, Rumi, Hedāyat and Jamāl-zāde.

In order to translate the text so deeply rooted in the culture different from ours, the text which refers to the realities unfamiliar to its would-be new readers, a translator has to undertake a double task: not only has he to transpose the text from one language and literary system to another but, moreover, to present the mother-culture of the text to its reader in the way which would allow him to reduce the gap between the two cultures and to enable a reader to move, more or less freely, within the dense reality of the novel.

Prior to undertake this duty, a translator has to establish a sort of "mental map" of chronological, spatial and cultural dimensions of the story for himself.

Some of my experiences in this field, in connection with the translation of Pārsipur's novel, will be presented below.

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<sup>2</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Tehrān, Našr-e Alborz, 1372 (1993).

## 1. Historical background and chronology

Since the narrative of *Tubā* is set in historical frames, a reconstruction of historical events in its background is helpful in establishing the chronology of the reality of the novel. The observation point of the narrative is that of the heroine: from her house's inner courtyard *Tubā* can apprehend only isolated events of the outside world, detached from their political context and deprived of their logical sequence. Thus, the historical facts which form the background of *Tubā*'s life-story, in most cases are signaled indirectly, by brief allusions and references only. But even these scanty signals serve as important indicators of the passage of time, of the characters' age and changes occurring in the outside world. Thus, all these tracks should be thoroughly deciphered by a translator, so that he could precisely establish the course of action and be able to choose the best translatory solutions.

By examining all the data, one may try to establish the chronology of *Tubā*'s and her family's life. In the opening parts of the story, which concern *Tubā*'s father *Hāji Adib*, we come across some clues which allow a reader to fit his biography in a historical setting. An event mentioned in connection with his childhood is the appearance of a "rebellious woman" (*zan-e tāqi*) well versed in theology and subject to many controversies; then, in *Hāji*'s youth, a Herat war breaks out (p. 12). If we assume that the woman in question is a *Bābi* female leader and poetess *Qorrat al-eyn* (executed in 1852), and that the second (1856-7) Perso-Afghan war for Herat is meant, then *Hāji Adib* should have been born around 1840; and since we are told, that he did not marry before being fifty, *Tubā*, his eldest child, should have been born in early 1890s.

The turning point of the modern history of Iran, i.e. the proclamation of the Constitution (1906) is not mentioned directly in the text, though some other meaningful events related to the constitutional period are. *Mohammad-Ali šah*'s attack on the *Majles* of 1908, takes place in the novel short after *Tuba* marries for the second time, being about 18 years old.

The entrance of the Allied forces to Iran, in September 1941, is another distinct chronological point of the story. The event is referred to indirectly, when *Tubā*'s son in law, *Esmā'il* is released from jail and, to his surprise, finds the streets of Tehran crowded with foreign soldiers. Even before this event *Tubā* is said to be an "old woman" (*pir-e zan*). However, having reconstructed her chronology, we know that she is no more than about 50 years old then. Thus, *pir-e zan* can hardly be translated into Polish as *staruszka*, which is usually reserved for the persons of a more advanced age. A translator may choose, according to the context, between *starsza pani* – "an elderly lady" (marked by a hint of respect, which is not always the case in the story) and clearly pejorative *starucha*, *stara baba*, or simply *stara*, none of them rendering properly the neutral Persian *pir-e zan*, its literal equivalent *stara kobieta* being not a common designation in vernacular Polish.

The story ends with *Tubā*'s death in the "modern" times – it is impossible to establish the date of this event more precisely, except for the date *post quam*. Since *Tubā*'s daughter's adopted daughter *Maryam* dies shot as a leftist guerilla, one should place the event after the emergence of the extreme political groups (here probably the Marxist *Fedāiyan-e Xalq* guerilla is meant), active since ca 1963. Yet, in the novel one finds no mention of *Mohamamad-Rezā*'s "White Revolution", or the protests accompanying its referendum, and of the voting rights acknowledged to women in the same year 1963.

## 2. Living space

The majority of the story's events occur inside Tubā's house. No literal description of its interior comes in the book, and, from the point of view of an Iranian reader, needs not to come, because he knows perfectly well what a traditional urban house looks like. However, this is not the case with a Western reader, for whom the description of the characters' attitudes and ways of moving inside the house may be unintelligible, unless he learns how the house is constructed and furnished. Also a translator, in order to render properly all the situations which occur in the interior, first has to imagine the inside of the house for himself, then to look for Polish terms which would describe the phenomena in question in the most adequate way possible.

While reading the book, a reader/translator finds out that in fact the action of the novel is set not in the interiors as such, but rather in the courtyard of the house, which plays the role of a common space and of a sort of scene on which all the important events take place. The rooms and the kitchen concentrate around the courtyard and have separate entrance doors each. Judging by the fact that the characters mount the stairs in order to enter their rooms, the rooms are located above the level of the yard; in several places a veranda (*eyvān*) is mentioned. A reader learns little about the internal plan of the house (e.g. how the rooms are connected with each other); what he learns is that the curtains inside some rooms divide the living space into male and female spheres: when talking to a male stranger, Tubā sits behind the curtain, and her princely brother-in-law attacks her imagined lover hidden there (p. 170). A reader gets to know that there are large underground stores, which contain several water tanks and Tubā's weaving workshop. Also a dark and wet room which hosts a refugee family from Azarbaijan and then some other characters, and which plays an important role in the story, is said to be in the basement (*zir-e zamin*) but, apparently, at the side of the court opposite to Tubā's apartments: Tubā's daughter Munes, who lives in this room after her secret marriage with Esmā'il, tries to visit her husband unnoticed by Tubā who observes the courtyard from her window.

The courtyard is connected with an entrance door by a *hašti* or *dālān* (a sort of corridor, narrow passage between two walls, or entrance hall, possibly to be translated into Polish as *sień*, *brama*, *korytarz*) and is apparently placed below the street level (the characters descend a couple of steps down, as they enter the courtyard from the outside). A part of the house facing the street contains several shops and has an upper floor (*bālā-xāne*), which is sometimes hired to residents; however, since the novel's action usually takes place inside the compound, no opportunity is given to the reader to look at the house from the outside.

The following example shows, how important the knowledge of the plan of the house may be for the correct translation of the text:

*Hāji Mahmud dar pāšir vozu migereft [...]. Hāji tā biyāyad az pellehā be hayāt berasad Tubā [...] dar kuče be rāh ofīāde bud.* (p. 36)

"Hāji Mahmud was performing his ablutions at the tap (*pāšir*) [...]. By the time he reached the courtyard by the stairs, Tubā was already walking in the street."

Using the verb *rasidan* ('to reach') the Persian sentence does not precise the direction of Hāji's motion (up or down the stairs), so its Polish translator is not sure which verb to choose: *schodzić* – to descend, or *wchodzić*, *wychodzić* [*na górę*] – to mount (the stairs), unless he learns from the sequel of the story (the murder of Setāre, which takes

place at the *pāšir*, p. 186 ff), that the term refers to the tap of an underground tank, deep in a cellar.

Some Persian terms concerning the details of the construction and equipment of the house have no direct equivalents in Polish language, because the devices themselves do not exist.

E.g. such terms as: *houz-xāne* (a 'water-pool-room', underground as a rule, apparently non-existent in Tubā's house, but mentioned in the context of her meeting with her spiritual master in Kermanshah); *pāšure* /*pāšuye* ('a feet-washing [place]' i.e. a small ditch around a water-pool in the courtyard); or *korsi* (a chaircoal heater, kept under a sort of short table covered with a thick quilt) cannot be translated otherwise than in a descriptive manner. For some other terms (*hašti*, *dālān*, *tāqče*, *sandug-xāne*, *zir-e zamin*, *bāqče*) some approximate equivalents, covering a part of the meaning, may be found.

The same is true for the outside urban space, playing a less important role, but nevertheless present in the novel. Typical elements of a traditional Muslim city such as *čārsu*, *bāzārče*, *timče*, *saqā-xāne*, *tekiye*, *juy* etc., and such social institutions as *mirāb*, *luti* etc., can be hardly rendered by the terms at Polish translator's disposal.

Similar problems arise in connection with various aspects of everyday life: public baths, dress, food etc.

### 3. Social realities

The religious sphere is crucial for the novel's narrative. Tubā is a sensitive, gifted person, coming from a family with a strong Shi'a theological background. Being deprived of other possibilities of intellectual and emotional involvement, she develops some particular mystical capacities. Her style of religiousness is rooted in Muslim Sufi tradition, but sometimes comes close to a popular cult of ancestral souls and female fertility patrons.

While basic theological notions are common to Christianity and Islam and present no problems in translation, a translator will come across some difficulties when dealing with Sufism and with Shi'ia cult, especially in its popular version.

Such terms as: *salavāt*, *rouze-xāni*, *hoseyniye*, *tekiye*, *ta'ziye*, *emāmzāde*, *torbat*, *daxil*, *nazr*, *xāneqah*, *pir*, *zehr* etc. can be rendered through no precise Polish equivalent.

Also the terms referring to family relations, law and practices may be difficult to render in Polish. A translator has to cope with such notions as *mahramiyat* (a state of familial proximity, which allows a woman to disclose herself before a man); *havu* (co-wife in a polygamous marriage), *siqe* (temporary wife), *edde* (a quarantine period after divorce) etc.

Some terms of kinship can be translated only in an approximate way, for example *amqozi* is, according to the dictionary<sup>3</sup>, "one's father's brother's (or father's sister's) daughter" (*doxtar-e amu yā amme*); in the first case, it may be translated as *stryjeczna siostra* quite accurately, the other one has no equivalent in Polish. However, in *Tubā* the term seems to have a broader meaning of a female relative on father's side: Amine-xānom is said to be for Tubā *doxtar amu-ye pedar-aš*, i.e. "her father's paternal uncle's daughter" (p. 156), thus an aunt rather than a cousin, although they seem to be, more or less, of one age. At the same time Amine-xānom addresses Tubā as her *dāyqozi*, that should mean, *per analogiam* "one's mother's brother's (or mother's sister's) daughter",

<sup>3</sup> A. Najafī, *Farhang-e fārsi-ye āmyāne*, Tehrān 1378 (1999).

so the situation seems both inconsistent and untranslatable, and in Polish version the two ladies have to remain simply cousins (*kuzynki*), with no specification.

Some terms may have different semantic fields in both languages. For instance, in the opening sentences of the book (p. 3) Tubā is referred to as *bive-ye hijdah-sāle* (an eighteen-year old widow), but further on a reader learns that she had just divorced: the term *bive* in Persian has a double use, meaning both a widow and a divorced woman, which is not the case in Polish. The ambiguity of the term, in some passages consciously played out by the author, cannot be rendered properly in Polish, which has two different words: *wdowa* (widow) and *rozwódka* (divorcee). When Fereydun-mirzā's sister declares, that her brother is ready to marry a *bive-mive* (the expression being an "echo" compound), she clearly means both possibilities (p. 62). The closest Polish equivalent seems to be *wdowa-nie-wdowa* ("a widow and the like").

A peculiarity of Pārsipur's style is that her text is almost totally deprived of dialogue, using reported speech instead. That exempts a translator from the duty of rendering the ways in which the novel's characters address each other using the forms which reflect a complex mutual hierarchy and interdependence relations between them. Yet, the question of proper names and honorific titles remains: in Qājār Iran the practice of conferring such titles to the royal family members and courtiers (of both sexes), state functionaries and military officers was common. These titles, taking grammatical form of an Arabic *status constructus* were, as a rule, exaggerated and bombastic: *Mošir ad-doule* (Adviser of the State), *Faxr as-saltane* (Pride of the Monarchy), *Adib al-mamālek* ([The Greatest] Erudite of the Countries) etc. Tubā, when marrying a Qājār prince, is granted the title *Šams al-moluk* ("The Sun of the Kings"); while her princely husband is known as *Kamāl ad-doule* ("Perfection of the State") etc. The Arabic compound forms sound awkward in Polish, especially as nobody knows how to decline them. Current practices in dealing with such constructions in Polish context are diversified: from non-declining them at all (that stays in sharp contradiction with the flexive character of Polish noun), up to declining both parts of the compound. In the latter case it seems that sometimes the two elements are imagined to be two independent units, namely a first name and a family name, as practiced in the West. Moreover, it happens that, due to the lack of understanding of the nature of the grammatical structure in question, Polish users do not know where to put the borders between the elements of the construction. Thus, we come across the solutions such as: *władza Zii Ulhaka* ("The rule of Ziyā al-Haqq") as well as: *dom Abdula Madżida* ("The house of Abd al-Majid"). Another way of dealing with such names and titles in Polish context seems to be treating them as a complex unit, i.e. declining only the last part of them: *dom Abdulmadżida* ("The house of Abd al-Majid"). This solution puts stress on the inseparability of the elements of the name /title. However, it suggests, thus, a continuous record which blurs the semantic construction of the compound and makes it too long (*Adibolmamālek*, *Manzaros-saltane*, etc.).

Similar problems may be faced in the case of proper names with a honorific title in post- (or pre-) position, e.g.: *Fereydun-mirzā*, *Ali-āqā*, *Āqā-Rezā*, *Rostam-xān*, *Almās-xātun*, *Hāji Mahmud*, *Mirzā Kāzem* etc., where the way of their declension, each time, should be decided upon by a translator, and sometimes, as in the cases of *mirzā* or *āqā*, for phonetic reasons no satisfying solution can be found on the ground of Polish language. Another problem to be solved by a translator is whether such titles should be capitalized as parts of proper names, or treated as common nouns and written in small letters (*Mirzā Abuzarr* or *mirzā Abuzarr*? *Habibollāh-xān* or *Habibollāh Xān*, *Habibollah Khan/Chan*?)

The practical question which arises is: how to translate a culturally unfamiliar text in order to integrate it into one's own literary and cultural tradition, at the same time saving as much of its original cultural distinctiveness as possible. A translator has several strategies at his disposal:

- finding the terms possibly the closest to the “non-translatable” origin: having no precise equivalent for a *juy* (water running along a street), one may choose between *strumyk*, *potok* (stream, brook), *kanal* (canal), *rów* (ditch), *rynstok* (gutter), *ściek* (sewer) none of them rendering fully the Persian term;

- replacing a single term with a description, e.g.: *Mardom čandin-o čand bār salavāt ferestādand* (p. 157) may be translated as: *Ludzie wielokrotnie wzniesli okrzyk ku czci Proroka i jego rodziny* (“The people many times uttered a cry in prize of the Prophet and his family”), which precisely renders the sense of the original term *salavāt ferestādan* (lit. “to send greetings /blessings”), but lacks its technical aspect and lapidarity;

- leaving the original term as it is: *Vāqe'iyat-e talx-e havu-ye čahārdah sāle hame-ye andišeā-ye digar-rā bā xod jāru karde bud* (p. 170) – *Gorzka prawda o czternastoletniej hawu wyparła wszystkie inne myśli* (“The bitter truth about her fourteen-year old *havu* wiped away all her other thoughts”), where the term *havu* (co-wife) remains untranslated and unexplained, but obviously all its original semantic aspects stay untouched. Using an original term may have some side effects. One of them is a suggestion of familiarity with the culture of the original (“we do not need to translate the term, because we know what it means”); another result of preserving strange words may be, quite the opposite, the creation of an effect of exoticism of the original text and taking a cultural distance from it: when the term *Allāh* is rendered by Polish *Bóg* (God), a reader feels that Muslim God is not distinct from the Christian one, but when a translator leaves the original term untranslated, he seems to suggest that two different gods are worshiped by the Christians and Muslims. Interestingly, no attempts at creating cultural distance through preserving the original word can be observed, so far, in Polish translatory practice towards the Persian term for God – *Xodā*.

In the case of *Tubā*, in order to familiarize the reader with the realities of the novel, some additional devices which reach beyond the translated text itself may be applied, for instance:

- a translator's introduction to the cultural, historical etc. background of the text;
- footnotes explaining the specific terms, references etc.;
- a lexicon of original terms and proper names at the end of the book;
- the use of visual material: pictures, maps, tables (photos and plans of the Qājār and Pahlavi Tehrān, pictures of the people of the epoch, of interiors of traditional old houses etc).